

Engaged Leadership It Works!

When I was just a lieutenant back in 1989, I learned the hard way what happens when Soldiers don't follow the rules. I was a platoon leader, and one of my Soldiers died in a vehicle accident. I'll never forget that Soldier or the lessons I learned following his accident. Another Soldier from a different platoon chose to drive drunk one night, and my Soldier made a decision to get in the vehicle with him. The other Soldier survived the accident and was charged with vehicular manslaughter.

Several years and promotions later I was assigned as a battalion commander. Going into this command, I promised I'd do everything in my power to make sure we didn't lose a single Soldier to an accident. I believe all accidents are preventable IF leaders at all levels stay engaged. In keeping with that philosophy, we kept safety at the forefront of every Soldier's mind without hindering our mission.

I don't know how many lives we saved, but I can tell you we didn't lose even one Soldier to an accident. We'd logged more than 450 accident-free days as I relinquished command, and the post commanding general recognized the unit's success with a safety award. Just over a year later, the unit is still in the top quartile of the Army Readiness Assessment Program. So, how did we do it?

First, let me say I'm writing this article anonymously because the success of this battalion's program isn't about me. It's about the sacrifice, discipline and attention to detail these Soldiers demonstrate every day, a true team effort to keep everyone in the fight to preserve combat power. The credit doesn't go to me, but to the brave Soldiers and leaders that get to the core of preventing needless accidents. I was blessed just to be a part of this great success story, and I have the highest respect for the current commander who's doing his job so well.

I think the biggest factor in our success was engaged leadership. We held leaders at every level, especially our squad and junior leaders, accountable for their Soldiers' actions. I occasionally spoke with all leaders (corporal and above) about their engagement and safety responsibilities, and the battalion command sergeant major would talk with Soldiers about discipline and safety awareness. We made it clear every leader had a responsibility to identify high-risk Soldiers and implement controls to keep those Soldiers in check.

Undoubtedly, command emphasis is important; however, we believed the center of gravity for preventing accidental loss was the squad leader. As first-line supervisors, squad leaders spend more time with and know their Soldiers better than anyone else. We allowed time every Friday for squad leaders to talk with their Soldiers in a format similar to U.S. Army Europe's "Under the Oak Tree Counseling." When the squad leader was finished, the platoon leader and sergeant, followed by the company commander and first sergeant, addressed their Soldiers. Finally, I gave a safety brief before releasing the Soldiers for the weekend.

This process, which included interaction from all levels of leadership, occurred every week. To make sure everyone was listening, we sometimes called for volunteers to give the weekly safety brief. This practice was a big success; our volunteers always did a superb job telling their fellow Soldiers to stay out of trouble and be safe. We also occasionally invited military police and Mothers Against Drunk Driving representatives to speak at the final formation.

The battalion was very aware of the top hazards that could seriously injure or kill our Soldiers. We spent a lot of time putting controls in place to eliminate all types of accidents, including POV, motorcycle, combat logistical patrol, weapons handling, maintenance and swimming, to name a few. We completed a risk management worksheet for every major on-duty event, and the CSM and I received a back brief on the risk assessments for these missions.

Obviously, motorcycle and POV accidents were a huge concern. All motorcycle riders signed a contract with the battalion and their company commanders, and I personally conducted a one-on-one counseling session with them. We also began a mentorship program where we paired experienced bikers with novice riders so they could share their knowledge of the road. The buddy system was a big part of our success as well. Every Soldier was assigned a battle buddy to help keep each other straight, especially after duty hours. In addition, we conducted mandatory POV inspections and risk assessments before every three- or four-day weekend.

Products from the U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center, including preliminary loss reports, the



ASMIS-2 POV Risk Assessment Tool (now TRiPS), posters, videos and other media, also helped us stay accident free. We distributed and discussed the latest PLRs with our Soldiers every week at final formation, emphasizing hazards and controls. Every Soldier had to complete an ASMIS-2 assessment before being released for pass or leave with no exceptions. The videos were invaluable for safety stand-down days, and we hung the posters in common areas for maximum exposure.

Here are some additional TTPs that worked for my unit:

- Mandatory quarterly safety councils
- Incentives and awards
- Newcomers' briefs—an excellent opportunity to indoctrinate new Soldiers in the battalion's safety culture

If you're a leader reading this article, get and stay engaged. Command involvement down to squad level enhances the commander's safety program and keeps our Soldiers in the fight. We turned the arrow down in fiscal 2006, so continue to do your part in preventing accidental loss. You ARE making a difference!